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# Abe Bassett interview, Professor Emeritus and Former Chairperson of the Department of Theater Arts, Wright State University

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**Wright State University**  
**Retiree Association Oral History Project**

Interview Date: February 11, 2002

Interviewer: Lewis Shupe  
Professor Emeritus, Department of Communications  
Wright State University

Interviewee: Dr. Abe Bassett  
Professor Emeritus and Former Chairperson of the  
Department of Theatre Arts, Wright State University

*Dr. Bassett, thank you for participating in this oral history project.*

**Can you share with us how and when you first came to Wright State University, and a little bit about your background?**

I was hired at the beginning of the 1970 academic year. However, I first came to Wright State in 1966. Two good friends of mine, Ralph and Dolores Winkler, lived here in Dayton and they told me about Wright State. Ralph had been on the fundraising committee and was very proud of the work the committee had done in raising the million dollars that it took to get the first building under construction. So I came to Dayton to visit them and I remember driving out to the campus, and there was one building up and it looked rather strange but I felt this was a terrific opportunity and I ended up writing a letter to the dean, I think Bordeneau [Bordinat] was his name, or something similar to that, and he thanked me for the letter and said he was forwarding it to the Department of Speech chairperson, who was Charlene Edwards. I never received a response from Charlene, so I forgot about it, but I didn't forget about the possibility of someday being at Wright State University. In 1968, I went from Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington to Dickinson State University in North Dakota. I knew that was not a permanent move for me because of its isolation and the small school, but I went there as a full professor and as a good salary increment, and as chair of the Department of Theatre Arts, factors which really put me in a good stead for coming to Wright State. In January, 1970, I went to the Speech Association of America convention in Washington and there was an announcement from Wright State University that they were looking for a director of Theatre and Dean Bill Baker was interviewing and I interviewed with him. A couple of weeks after returning to North Dakota, I got an invitation to come to campus to interview, which I did. They later told me that I was selected for the job because, of the three candidates they brought in, I was the one who was the most enthusiastic about Wright State. I truly was enthusiastic. This was a budding state university in a large metropolitan area- large compared to any place I had ever taught before- and I thought the potential here was just terrific for having a well-funded program and for having a ready supply of students and potential students, so I was quite excited about coming.

**You mentioned about driving up to one building. What was your impression about seeing just one building?**

I thought it looked strange. I knew that it was going to be more than one building. It was a four story brick building. The day I came out the university was closed and there was nobody around so it really did look rather strange, but I thought, "That's okay, this is a start." I had a positive impression of it, even though I did think it was rather funny looking at the time.

**With one building and being a theatre person, what did they promise you for a theatre?**

In 1970, when I came to interview, the Creative Arts Center had been funded by the state. My understanding of that is that the university knew they needed a library and they knew they needed a gymnasium, and they sort of threw in a request for a creative arts center because they thought that it would give the state something to lop off; and then they would get the important buildings – the library and the gymnasium. They were surprised that they actually got funding for the Creative Arts Center, so when I came to interview – and that was the reason why they created this new position of director of Theatre; because they wanted somebody to come in and be involved with the design of the theatre. When I got here, I was hired probably in February, and then for four consecutive months they flew me in from North Dakota so I could consult with the theatre people on campus and with the architect and to help develop a program for the new building. So I was involved with that, not involved with the selection of the architect, but involved with the design of the theatre from the earliest time.

**Historically, who were the theatre people with whom you interviewed? Do you remember?**

Yes I do, I do remember. It was the Department of Speech. It may have been the Department of Speech and Theatre, but it was probably the Department of Speech. Charlene Edwards was the chairperson. Bunny [Beverly] Gaw, Gene Eakins, Paul Lane, Fred Myers. Paul Lane was a theatre person and Fred Myers was technical director. There may have been one other person, but it was a small department of I think six people; I would have been the sixth or seventh person. Fred Myers was the real theatre person. Paul Lane didn't show any enthusiasm for going through the building plans so he was not involved. Pretty much, Fred Myers and I were the two people who were really involved in representing the University and helping complete the design project.

**Now, I will let you go back to where you were being flown in from North Dakota....**

An interesting thing about the architects, they were selected from several architects. There was a man from Yellow Springs who had done an art building on the Antioch Campus. He was rejected because they thought his firm was not big enough, although they liked him as a designer. The firm that was selected came from Cincinnati. The only name I can remember at the present is Del Strickland. The man who made the

presentation, who was one of the partners of the design firm, I met him and he was very smooth and articulate. He seemed very much in charge and promised a great product but when push came to shove, which was the next year, he wasn't around because he was also a professor at Miami University. He was going to take some architecture students to England for the year so he was not involved and the project was left in the hands of his associates, who were less experienced, and it was up to them to do the design work. Because of that, we had a great number of problems in designing the building and getting the building to a place that we thought was acceptable.

### **Can you talk about some of those problems?**

Yes I can. Let me say that at one point well into the design process, it was during winter break, probably in December 1971, we were coming close to the end of the biennium. We were so frustrated with the problems that Fred and I made a very, very strong presentation in which we outlined the problems we were having and said they must scrap the plans and start from scratch, because they simply were not meeting our expectations. Fred White was acting president that year and he became involved in this. He heard our complaints and, ultimately, said to the architect, "Meet the needs of the users."

### **Now, what was the time lapse between initiation and when you said, "We need to look at it again."**

My guess is, between the time that Fred White became involved, we are probably looking at one month; probably in January. Fred White was concerned that if we didn't spend the money and get the money committed, it would go back to the State and we may have to go through the process again of asking for an appropriation. He felt that would be dreadful and he wanted to avoid that. He thought the appropriate thing to do was that the designers had to meet the users' needs.

-Okay, some of the problems were just incredible. When the architects would come in with their plans, one of the first things Fred and I would do is we would take a ruler and we would look at sight lines. Incidentally, by the way, Fred was 6 ft. 3 in., a tall guy, I was 6 ft. 1-1 ½ in., so we had two fellows here with long legs. We would determine that the auditorium itself was going to be comfortable – comfortable in being able to stretch out our legs and to have people walk before us, that we could see and that we could hear. That was really primary for us. One of the first things we would do is take a slide rule and check the sight lines from the sides and from the balcony, because the architect decided we had to go to a balcony. At one point, they came in with a plan that if you were sitting in the balcony and you projected the sight line, the sight line went to about the middle of the stage, and we said, "That's not acceptable", and Del Strickland, I remember this very well, he said, "Well, when you have a performance in which people are on the tip of the thrust, don't sell tickets". Well, we're talking about a 380 or 390 seat theatre, and they were telling us that you don't have to sell tickets; that you would have some seats that were not good. We said, "No, that's not acceptable." So that was the real problem.

A second problem we had was the height of the stage in relationship to the first row of seats. In old theatres, when you go to London- I go to London every year- there are still some 19<sup>th</sup> century theatres where the stage is about four feet, or even taller than four feet, so if you sit on the front row you are looking up, you are really looking up. We said that was not acceptable; 3 ft. maximum, or something in this area, that was one of the things we were holding out for. Well, to make sure the first row was going to be comfortable in watching the action, they had to do some reconfiguration for the whole auditorium and the way it was raked, and that caused them some consternation, but nonetheless we held out for that because we thought that was essential. We said we simply couldn't start with a 4 ft. stage or 4 ½ ft. stage.

Now, the third major point we had a fight about was incredible. The stage house was 40x80; 40 ft. deep and 80 ft. wide, which was good height and good width and we were happy about that. But on the corner of the building- that was going to be the main entrance to the building from the site of the library; they conceived that as being the main entrance to the building. They were going to have a curve that came from downstage right, in the corner, and came all the way up to the center of the back wall. It was going to impinge very severely on the shape of the stage house, and we said, "No, we cannot live with that". Del Strickland said, "You don't understand." He said, "This is aesthetically very important to the exterior of the building." I said, "You don't understand, because this is a stage house." Finally, we did compromise and back in the corner they were able to put a little bit of a curve back there. But those were the three major points we fought about on the building. I think there were things that we argued about and we asked for, but that's at the point when they were coming in with these particular things that we said, "You have to start from scratch."

Something we asked for that they did not give us, they just ignored: We said [to] account for an addition to the building, because what we had was a theatre and a second theatre space, a make-up room, three offices, a small green room and a workshop for scene construction, and the costume construction shop. We had no classrooms; no classrooms. So there was simply no place for us to conduct the academic business, and we knew we would have to have a building addition at some point. We always referred to this as CAC1: Creative Arts Center, Phase 1, and we never let the university or the Board of Trustees ever forget that there was Phase 2 coming down the pike. Over the years, I had many opportunities to meet with the Board because we were being showcased, so we always talked about Phase 2.

### **What about office space?**

We doubled people up for awhile into the corner of the costume shop. We started putting people into the green room. We divided the green room down and it lost its function. Eventually, we had to put people over into Allyn Hall or Millett Hall, because we just didn't have space.

**Now, this was the Creative Arts building. Can you speak just a bit about articulating with music and with arts, because I think that's an interesting element to the building.**

In the beginning, there was discussion about having one auditorium of maybe 600 seats for music and for theatre. That was shot down immediately by everybody involved – the music people and the theatre people. We said, no, no, no, no, no – we cannot live with that, because we knew if we had active programs we just simply couldn't share and it would hinder the growth of our programs. We had to have our own space.

With the Art department, the Art wing was off by itself and we had no input into that. Someone had made a decision, it wasn't us, it was higher up, that Art was going to have so much space and Music was going to have so much space. I wasn't involved in those decisions. If I had been, we would have had more space. We were pretty separated from the Art department in terms of their space and our space. We were happy to have a performing space because that was the crux of building our program. Without our own theatre space- and it was an excellent theatre space when we finally got it up and got it working- it was the reason that we got started. The emphasis was on productions, good productions, and we achieved that.

**What year did it actually get started?**

Let me see. I think our first season was 1973.

**In the new house?**

In the new house. Can we talk about the first years of theatre production? I came to Dayton, I think about June 1, 1970, and spent a month finding a place to live and getting my family moved in. I believe on July 1, approximately, I came to work, and I wasn't on the payroll. I came in and I moved my books in and got my office space straightened out. I started meeting with Fred Myers and we started going out to lunch, and started talking and looking at the plans. We did one other thing, very importantly, and that is we started looking for an off-campus space for theatre, because we were told- where were we, in Oelman Hall? Where plays were done the year before, a couple of years before? Before I came, the year before I came, they did three plays and I believe they did it for maybe two weekends, four performances-

**You don't know the names of the plays, do you?**

I have a list of them and I can add those in later. -Back to the off-campus space for theatre. They said no, because of the chemistry class, we could only get in there for one weekend and we could only have one night of preparation. I said we just couldn't live with that so we started going around scouting all over the area for a suitable place, sound space, as they would call it. We actually found a very nice little church in the Oregon District and made a presentation to their board of directors. It wasn't being used as a church but was still under the control of the church, and they turned us down. That was

probably the first week in August when they turned us down. It was very grim at that point because I didn't know of any other place that was possible.

### **Now, the year again?**

This would have been in the summer of 1970, so August of 1970. Then somebody said, hey, there is a little hall on National Road. We went to see this place and it was an old Grange Hall on National Road. We found the people who owned it and made a presentation to them. We talked about rent and they agreed to let us have that as a space on an annual rent. It wasn't very much money, maybe \$1500 for the year. What we got was three weeks, six times a year. We had one week to set up our theatre, then two weekends for performances. I think we did like six performances for each play. That first year we did six productions. Fred Myers- I just have to give him all the credit in the world- worked so incredibly hard with his students. The very first play we did in there we had to bring in electrical service, additional electrical service. We had to devise trees to hang light instruments. We had to transport everything that we owned from the university to the theatre and set it up, and we still had to do that in a week's time and have enough time to run through a couple of tech rehearsals and get everything done. I mean, no one in his right mind would do that. Maybe that's why those other people who came to interview for the job weren't very enthusiastic about coming, because it was an incredible amount of work. When the first play was done, we had to strip the theatre of seats, of the risers, of everything that we had brought in, and vacate the place until we came back for the next play.

### **Now, you may have an interesting point. Did you own much equipment to bring in?**

I forgot exactly what we had. We probably had a portable light board or maybe we rented it. We probably had a few dozen light instruments, maybe a couple dozen simple light instruments. We didn't own much but, yes, we owned a little bit. Whatever we had, we took to the New Liberty Theatre on National Road. I think that is what we called our theatre there at the beginning.

### **And that's right across from AFIT, the Air Force property.**

Do you know what? It was really exciting. One of the things I marveled at was the quality of students we had. We didn't have a lot of students and, boy, did we work them hard, but they loved it and they were there for us. They got a lot of great experience. Some of these people were very bright, they were really very bright. Some of them, their families had money that they could have afforded to go away to other schools, certainly other state universities. I asked some of them years later, "Why did you come to Wright State and why did you stay?" I think the reason they came to us is because they knew it was a work in progress. They were excited about the fact that it was going to be a new program and they were excited about the fact that we were doing a lot of productions. They liked the quality of the productions and the opportunities they had. I look back upon the kids we had in 1970 and there were some very, very good people among them. We were very lucky to have them here.

**What was your theatre program? What were your plays?**

I have that here and it may take a minute to find them. But that first-

**That would be interesting to know exactly, with your limited resources, what it is that you would like to present.**

I was producer. I only directed one show that year. I remember that the show I directed, it was my first opportunity to work with black students. I did a show called *In White America*, by Martin Guberman. It was sort of a documentary, talking about what it was like to be black in white America. I had three white students and three black students, and do you know it was scary because that was the height of racial tensions, and I had some tension among my three black and three white students.

**Were they all theatre majors?**

They were all theatre majors. You know, I would have to look at that- [looking through papers] *In White America* – Bill Caplan is still in Dayton; Marv Lawson, theatre major; David Lee, yes; Linda Myer. Oh, I had 10 students, I forgot that. Siney[sp?] Richardson was a black student, she was very good. Larry Persons. No, they were not all theatre students.

**But they were all students?**

They were all students, except I think one of my black students I had to recruit from outside. He hadn't had that much experience and I remember he had trouble getting his lines, but the play I thought was fairly successful. Pete Bukalski was in the motion picture area and I asked Pete to help me. We went through books and books and found a lot of images so we could have a multimedia presentation with slides, and that's what we used, a couple of slides. I thought it was very effective and I learned a lot, but it really scared me a little bit. You know- this is a digression. The Bolinga Center, I think, was formed about that time, and speaking of black actors, the black students that we had were pressured, I believe, by Bolinga Center, for participation in "whitey's theatre". We had a lot kids who would be with us for one year or for two years and then would quit for one reason or another, and these were sometimes for students who were getting parts and had talent. When they had talent, we found uses, we found roles for them. This was a time of just a lot racial tension in the country and on campus.

**It was also the Vietnam era.**

The Vietnam era, yes. So, we had trouble keeping our black students. I know in our later years, in about 1967, I had an affirmative action complaint from one student. She was a freshman and she said she was turned down for a part, and I had to go through the rigmarole of doing all the statistics on it. When I finished with that report, I could show quite conclusively, at least to the satisfaction of the affirmative action officer here, that in



fact our treatment of minority students was fair and that they had a percentage of parts that was good, and we had nothing to apologize for because when we had talented students we used them and we mixed-matched; many times we went colorblind before that word became fashionable in theatre casting.

**What were some of the other productions? Just to have a sample.**

Yes. We [ruffling through papers]-

**I think this is marvelous that you have all of the programs; that you kept it.**

Paul Lane did *Exit the King*, by Eugene Ionesco. It was visually exciting, but I am not sure I can....

**Well, Ionesco is a challenging play to do.**

It is. We did *The Servant of Two Masters*. I had a wonderful actor, Michael Walsh. A tall, good-looking fellow played the lead and Ann Fogerty played the female lead. *The Servant of Two Masters*, directed by Carolyn Selberg, who was doing costumes for us that year.

**I noticed on the program, it's "The Department of Speech & Theatre Arts in association with Mask & Quill"?**

Yes, that was something that Charlene Edwards had started the year before, and we were still in the Department of Speech & Theatre and we were obligated to do that, and appropriately so.

**When did they separate? When did you separate?**

We separated, I think, after two years. Let me talk about Charlene. Charlene was a very interesting woman. She was a devotee of Ayn Rand, and she was a conservative; I think she was a political conservative. We didn't have conversations, I just assumed that from comments that were made. She did not believe in public education. I don't know why she was here because she would have been happier at a private, a conservatively private institution. She would not ask for funds to support the theatre productions. She actually supported theatre productions out of her own pocket.

**Did she actually do theatre productions before you came here?**

Yes. She was, in effect, the producer. She didn't direct them but she was department chair. She would come forward, out of her own pocket, with \$50 or \$100 to use petty cash, and then would recover that money out of her box office. If there was a profit, I think it probably went to Mask & Quill, and that's how she produced plays, because she did not believe the state should be involved in funding extracurricular activities. So you can see, in part, I think, probably why they created a position and went outside looking

for someone to come in and be director of Theatre, because you would have had a lot of problems, probably, in building a Creative Arts Center and also building a viable theatre program here. By the way, I was told when I was interviewed that I would have a course reduction and, you know, I came here and forgot to ask about it. I forgot to ask and it only dawned on me a couple of years later and I said, "Boy, I'm really working pretty hard." I was teaching three courses per term and producing six plays during the year, and I was meeting with the architects and doing design work, and I was never home.

**At this time, what were the programs in theatre arts?**

Oh, Barb Dreyer, I should add Barb Dreyer's name to the staff. There was public speaking, and-

**This is still speech?**

Yes, there were speech programs. Public speaking and some sort of speech therapy. I don't know how many majors there were, but I think it was still a speech program. Probably, if I am not mistaken, there was probably a speech degree with emphasis in different areas, including a speech degree with emphasis in theatre.

**So, theatre was not the major emphasis?**

Oh no, this was speech and theatre. When did the department break up? Bill Baker was dean the first year and I believe Bill resigned at the end of the 1970-71 year. They started a search for a new dean and I was on that search committee. I have to go back and look at the dates but either maybe that first year that I was here, Bob Power, who was assistant dean, asked me to be on a search committee. I was a full professor, I came in as full professor. I hadn't been around long enough to offend anybody, so I was a safe person to be on the search committee. Nick Piediscalzi was on the search committee, I remember that, and I said, "Oh, you're going to ask me to be on this committee?", because I knew how much work it would take. We went through the process and, of course, Gene Cantelupe was the person who was hired. He came in and assessed the situation. I believe it might have been Gene who was interested in seeing some turnover among various chairs. At least, I think he assessed Charlene Edwards and he wanted to see a change, and asked me if I was interested. I said yes, but only on the provision that we split the department. I think he thought that would be a good thing so he said yes, and I said, "Yes, okay, I will become chair of the Department of Speech & Theatre." I was the chairman of the Department of Speech & Theatre, with the understanding that the following year we would have a Department of Theatre and we would have a Department of Speech, because in the third year we had searches for three new speech people. During that year we hired Bob Prewitt, who came in as chair, Jim Sayer and Bill Rickert. So those three guys, who are still here at the university and have had long careers at this university, were here. Prewitt came in and they started building the speech department and it was a good thing. It was a good thing for them because the department strengthened itself and became much more vibrant and exciting. And you were hired.

**In theatre, though, you did not add other programs, such as motion picture or technical?**

Our degree program was a Bachelor of Arts and we developed emphasis in acting/directing as one, in technical theatre. I think we just started off with that emphasis. Motion picture was not part of the program. I will have to go back and go over the research. I think motion pictures came to the theatre from the library. It had started in the library and Peter Bukalski was affiliated as a professor with the library and the library saw that, well, academically- you know, there was talk in the early 70's about the future of libraries. Already, they had some inkling that it was going to become more electronic and they were starting to look forward to that, and they thought motion pictures would be a way to get away from the printed book into images. Peter saw this, motion picture production, as well as history and...

**What was his position?**

Well, he was in the library and I don't think he was tenured as faculty so he came over to the theatre department. So we had him as a faculty member but the year we had him he went on leave to finish up his doctorate at Ohio State. We hired a high school teacher by the name of Tom Clark to teach on a part-time basis, to teach adjunct while Peter was getting his doctorate. Well, at the last minute, Peter decided he was not going to come back. We were stuck and we had to hire somebody else. I think we kept Tom Clark for a year and then we did a search and found a wonderful, wonderful teacher by the name of Jerry Delamater, who was with us. He was an exquisite teacher with great credentials. His student evaluations were phenomenal. He was a real scholar and we kept him for three or four years, three years maybe, before he left us to go to the east coast and teach at an east coast school. That was a great loss and I hated to lose him. But the time that Jerry was with us, the motion picture program was not progressing. We were getting students but we didn't have equipment, we didn't have leadership there, and it was a mess. Let me just continue to talk with motion pictures. Motion pictures was a program in limbo until, I think in 1977, we hired a young assistant professor by the name of Charles Derry. I liked Chuck from the beginning and almost immediately asked him if he would consider taking over the chairmanship, the coordinator- we called them coordinators- of motion pictures. He didn't want to do it the first year but agreed to in the second year. From that time on, under his tutelage, motion pictures started to grow.

I've got to tell this story because it is absolutely true, and I give all the credit in the world to Chuck Derry. I have so much admiration for this man because he is brilliant, he is absolutely brilliant. He is a great teacher. He is a producer of films. He is a great organizer. He is totally sensible. This happened about three times over the years when he was coordinator of motion pictures. Chuck would go to his secretary and say, "I want to talk to Dr. Bassett and I want one hour's time." He would come in and he would have a three page or a four page memorandum, and he would say to me in effect, now you shut up (he didn't say those words), but be quiet because I am going to make a presentation. I have a memo for you but you are not going to get the memo until I leave this office, at the end. Because he wanted to read through it to make sure he could stop and comment.

So the memo had three parts to it: the problem, solutions for the problem, and recommended solutions. And, the solutions always had a monetary cost. Well, you can do this and it will cost you this; you can do this and it will cost you this; you can do this and the cost will be this; failure to act will result in this. Well, you know, if you have somebody who is coordinating an area for you, that's exactly what you want. You want somebody- because you can't micromanage, there is not enough time to micromanage and I don't have the expertise to micromanage. So every time that Chuck did that with me the responses were always the same. "Chuck, you have made your point, I agree with you, let me see what I can do," which meant let me see if I can find some resources for you. By golly, I did it. Every time he came in and said this is the problem and here is the solution, we met his needs.

So, motion pictures, year by year, got better and better and better and better. We made a great coup and Chuck was instrumental that we got a split appointment for Jim Klein and Julia Reichert. At the time they were married. Well, they were Academy Award nominees. They were great documentary film makers. That was prestige galore for us, to have them in there. And, we had one position and we split the position. This was the first time anybody in the university had split a position. So we went to bat for that and they gave us permission to split that position. They split it, and actually the way it worked is that Julia and Jim could split it, like one would work full-time and one would take off. They could take off for a quarter because they were doing films. They got divorced at one point in their tenure and they still continued to work and share this position, and get along with each other. So anyway, with Jim and Julia here, with Chuck here, and we were getting other people, the motion picture program just grew and we got more students. The students started getting recognition for their film work. I was just extremely proud of the work that the motion pictures area did. Eventually, I think in 1988, they got an Academic Excellence Award, the second one the department got and the third state-wide recognition. I am very proud of the fact that, before I left as chair, we had started the process of writing the application for Academic Excellence. So I got them started in writing that and at the beginning they didn't want to do any of that. But anyway, that's how motion pictures came to life.

**Now, you mentioned the resources became available. Where did those resources come from and did you work well with administration in funding your programs? And you can be very candid.**

Yes, well, let me come back to theatre on this. As I told you, Charlene Edwards- when I came here the budget was virtually nil; I mean we're talking about 100 bucks or something. It was virtually nil. Every year, we went to the university and made our budget request and would ask for so much money. The first year Bill Baker came up with rental money. We did not keep the box office money. Andy Spiegel was Provost and through Gene Cantelupe, we would go up and say.... we got \$10,000 once. That amount was the next year and the same amount the year after and we couldn't get an increase, then they would give us an increase angrily, you know, "Okay, here's more money", and finally, we kept saying, "Just let us have the box office". Well, I think they thought, "Good, we'll let them have the box office and we'll punish them because they

can't live on their box office". Well, it didn't work that way, because the cost of the tickets started going up and we started working to- we became entrepreneurs; we became business people. We started bringing in more people into the theatre and started raising the ticket prices every year. I was looking at the ticket prices for the first year for our first brochure, and we were offering six plays for the price of five, for \$7.50.

### **Now, this was on National Road?**

Yes, this was on National Road. So, \$7.50 would buy you tickets to six plays, if you can believe that. So we started every year adding, so our box office was getting better and better and better, especially when we moved into the Creative Arts Center and we had lots and lots of seats there. I remember once, before we moved into the Creative Arts Center, we did not have enough money for lighting instruments. I went to Gene Cantelupe and made my case, and he had a little pocket of money that was under his control that he hadn't dispersed yet. Kind of angrily, Gene said, "Oh, all right, here's some money, but no more. Go. Take it." And I'm sorry, but we just had to have that money because we had to have some new light instruments because it was a much bigger space and we didn't have it then.

### **Now let me just ask you a question relative to money, before you go on. Did you ever hear that theatre was the favorite program on campus and they got all of the resources?**

I was just going to address that. You know, that was so far off the mark. I'll tell you where I think that started. The first year that we were into the building, Gene was coordinating the three chairs for the dedication. He was involved with that almost from the beginning, the dedication.

### **And they were?**

That would be Ed Levine, and Bill Fenton, and myself; Bill Fenton in Music, Ed Levine in Art. So, after the chair meeting Gene would say, "Would the fine arts chair please stay with me", and he just wanted to go over this but it was almost every meeting. "Will the arts chair please meet with me for a few minutes afterwards", you know, over and over again. I'm sure the other chairs left the building saying, "Boy, he really loves that", but he was just involved in the dedication of the building and that's what that was all about. So people got the idea, I think from that early day, that he really loved the arts and that he favored us with a lot of extra money. But believe me, it wasn't the case. Later on, I made a presentation to administration. We were a profit center for the university. We were a profit center for the college in terms of student credit hours.

### **The College of Liberal Arts?**

The College of Liberal Arts. We were generating, and we were understaffed by state standards, and I beat them on the head with that constantly. We are understaffed, we're overworked, and we had the statistics by state standards because theatre was recognized

as a class 3A program or something in terms of what it takes to have a theatre program, as compared to say Sociology. We have small classes and Sociology can have a huge classes. Sociology was one of the departments that Bill Franklin, if you remember Bill Franklin, was chair for two or three years. He was antagonistic towards us. I think the next chair was antagonistic towards us. So we did have antagonism within the College of Liberal Arts toward us and I think it was totally unwarranted. And we were off in the corner, we were in other buildings, we didn't have a lot to do about it, we weren't involved politically and we didn't know what was going on. By the time I found out there was a brew-ha-ha about one thing or another, it was past history. I was pleased with that, I didn't want to have to be involved, so we were not involved and we didn't do any politicking. Any of us, we were simply too-

### **You probably didn't have time.**

We didn't have time. We were too busy. We were out in left field. We should have been our own college from the beginning, Then we could have operated better, I think. And Gene Cantelupe was a wonderful dean; he was terrific. I tell you, he worked this way: if he had faith in you as a department chair he got out of your hair. He would say things to you but he never interfered. So, if he was in another department's business it was because that department wasn't doing their job, the chair wasn't doing the job. But if you were good, if he thought you were good and if you were working hard and making progress, Gene simply was supportive. He was very supportive for us but he did not interfere with us. He would let us make our own mistakes. He was just absolutely great in that respect. He gave us moral support. He gave us moral support; he did not give us financial support. When he came we were woefully understaffed and underfunded. Actually, we did much better after he left in terms of support and faculty. The department grew a lot later, but it was tough.

### **Why don't you talk about maybe some of your biggest headaches and some of your biggest pleasures, and then we can come back to this chronology.**

Well, let's do it on a positive note. I take a great deal of pride about the fact that we were the university's first Academic Excellence program. What did we get the first time out, \$150,000? A huge sum of money.

### **Let me just make a statement here. The theatre program today is the premier program. It is an absolutely marvelous program, not only in Ohio, but in the nation. You are now laying groundwork for this very prestigious program, so this is what we now want to hear.**

Right. I think we got our award in 1983, and then later we got an Academic Challenge grant, which was \$650,000, then motion pictures got an Academic Excellence Award. I think getting there- you know, I used to drive to work up Grange Hall Road and think, "Boy, I'm going to work; this is terrific." You know, for probably 11 years, I could hardly wait to come to work in the morning because it was just so exciting building something. The Academic Excellence was a capstone because we were finally getting

recognition that we really worked very hard to get. Trying to get that recognition earlier was difficult within the university. Kegerreis was President and Andy Spiegel was the Provost. I asked Gene Cantelupe to set up a meeting with Kegerreis. I wanted to make a presentation to him. I forget the exact year, I would have to go back and see if I have a note. It might have been 1977-1978. We had already demonstrated certain things about the university- that we had an audience, that we were attracting students from outside this immediate area, from out of state, that we were garnering a lot of prestige for the university, and that the president, whenever he would meet the public would talk about the theatre program. So I went in and made a presentation. I had a little quiz for him, about audience size, about student credit hours, about all of this, and I rigged it so that there was a ridiculously high and a ridiculously low number, and they flunked the test. I said, "Well, you flunk. You failed the test here because you didn't get all of these facts." What I asked for was to recognize us as a flagship program and give us additional resources so we can build on this and go from here. I never heard anything from that meeting and two weeks later, three weeks later, a month later, I saw Spiegel and I said, "Andy, we haven't gotten a response." Here's what he said, he said, "When Keg walked out of that meeting he forgot totally about it. No reaction." He heard the presentation, he wrote in his famous yellow pad, took his notes, walked out and that was the last he gave. Another time, I went to Keg, and I think I went alone this time, Gene said, "No, it's not necessary for me to go." We had done an original play, we had the rights to the original play and we wanted to take that play to New York City-

### **What was the play?**

I can't recall. I can't recall the play.

### **What was the theme? Do you remember?**

No I don't, I'll have to go back and see if I can search for it.

### **Okay, we can insert that.**

And we wanted to do it off Broadway, something that some other universities did. We researched, we knew how much it would cost to rent a space, how much it would cost to transport it, how much it would cost to do some advertising. What a terrific coup this would be if we could go to New York and put this on for our students. Our students would be extremely proud about that. And I went to Keg and said that we wanted a raise, I think, \$30,000. This was in the early 80's. He made a phone call and it was perfunctory. He said, "Well, I tried and couldn't find anything." We asked Bernell Roberts at Mead and he couldn't help us. But, you know, we didn't get any help whatsoever, and this was terrifically exciting and I think that money was in the university budget somewhere. They could have found, out of a multimillion dollar budget, \$30,000 or whatever.

### **That's all it would have taken?**

That's all it would have taken. It might not even have taken that much. I am just getting at how much it was. That is just another example of the fact that we had a president whose attitude about leadership was laissez-faire. I think he was an outside president; he served on a lot of boards of directors, he was totally into community, and in terms of helping us and working with us, he took credit for any kudos that we got but there was no support there for us in terms of that extra little push. That's why Academic Excellence was so wonderful because it really gave us credibility within the university. Credibility, because there was antagonism in the College of Liberal Arts, there was apathy in the administration, and so the things we accomplished, I think we did with hard work, with dedicated faculty-

**And the Academic Challenge gave you bargaining power.**

Gave us bargaining power and certainly helped us in terms of getting Creative Arts Center II. I think that the art and music and art education programs never realized, never understood the extent of which that Phase II of the Creative Arts Center was because we were pushing for it all the time. When Roger Iddings came in and grabbed some space for art education, I was just really burned up about that, but he was good at doing that. What happened to art education and art therapy, "zonk", the art therapy program just got eaten up alive and thrown out a couple of years after the completion of the Creative Arts Center. I thought that was a shame. You guys had built up a beautiful, beautiful program there, and I'm sure you could do an oral history of loss of that.

**That is history in and of itself, which is both fortunate and unfortunate. So, other things- What was your brightest moment beyond the Academic Challenge, which was probably the brightest moment.**

Yes. Well, one of the early things that happened that was bright for us and just energized our faculty and energized our students and gave us credibility, not only in Ohio but in Michigan, Indiana and Ohio, and that was when we were the sponsor for the American College Theatre Festival. I remember, and this was about when, this was about 1976 I think. Marty Bennison from Miami University and Don Finn [ph] from Hope College in Hope, Michigan, came to visit me. It was late in the year and they said, "Would you consider sponsoring the American College Theatre Festival," which we had never been part of. We talked about it and I took notes and I said, "Well, I have to talk to the faculty", and I went to my faculty and I remember, Corliss Nickerson, who was our costume designer, had said she thought it was a great idea. The faculty said, yes, this is a great idea, so we went back and said, "Yes, we'll host it for you", and we did host it and it was so successful, I mean it was just exciting, and the university, Wright State could never host it again because it's grown so big now. At the time, we had 375 seats and we were sold out for that, and we actually turned a profit, we turned money over to American College Theatre Festival. But we got a great reputation around the three-state area as a department that could do a lot. They loved our facilities and they started thinking of us as an important part of theatre in this region.



Something else that we did, besides the American College Theatre Festival, is that we were very, very active in the Ohio Theatre Alliance. As a matter of fact, I was a founder of the Ohio Theatre Alliance.

[End of tape 1, side 1]

[Beginning of tape 1, side 2]

**This is side 2 of the first tape of the interview with Dr. Abe Bassett. He's going to be picking up on the idea of the Ohio Theatre Alliance. Dr. Bassett?**

Early in my tenure, I went to a national theatre conference, and John Walker of Ohio State was there and I had known John from an earlier time where I directed for him at Ohio University one summer. I said to John, "John, we really need our own state organization." We talked about that for a few minutes and he agreed. I said, "You're the only person that I know who can really get this going, because you are at the central university and you are esteemed, you have a reputation, you know the people and they will come if you call a conference." John did that in a few months and we had an organizing committee, and I was elected to the constitutional writing committee, and we formed an organization. And I think I had mentioned earlier that Al Kaufman from Ohio U., Don Rosenberg, John Walker, myself, and one other person who I can't remember—maybe Bill Allman from Baldwin-Wallace—were on that committee. That was the beginning of a great relationship that I had with those gentleman who I knew for the rest of my tenure in Ohio and with whom I still have friendships. It was a great organization. We got it going, we included the high school contacts, community theatre, and of course the college and university people, and the professional theatre. And there was a great deal of enthusiasm for it. I remember one time one of my faculty members mumbled under his breath, you know, I was always going off to the Ohio Theatre Alliance meeting and I should try and stay home and tend to business. But that was business and it was very beneficial for the department, and for myself. One it was first of all it was beneficial for myself because I got to know other programs and other people, and I found out what they were doing. It helped me make decisions about which way we wanted the department to grow. You know, you don't have mentors; mentoring, the word, wasn't invented. How does one learn to become a department chair, how does one learn to become head of a theatre? Well, you do it by experience. Of course, the second way you do it is simply by associating with people that you respect who have been there ahead of you and you learn from them. At any rate, we formed the organization and it was very valuable for almost all the time I was at Wright State. We had other faculty members who were involved. Dick Andrew, one of our faculty members, was the first newsletter editor. I was the first treasurer. I learned from my colleagues, Bill Reece [ph] at Ohio Northern, and Bill Allman at Baldwin-Wallace, they taught me how to set up tours, about going to England, which I wanted to do, so I owe that to them. I developed a very strong and close relationship with Chuck Dotwell [ph] at Otterbein College. He had a program that I greatly, greatly admired, and we were friendly and exchanged information and we visited each other's houses and went to conferences together. We were also in competition; we were in competition for the same kind of students and often took each other's students in a friendly, ethical way. And came to see each other's productions. It was just a

wonderful, wonderful organization, very vibrant. We even established here at the Archives, the University Archives, the Ohio Theatre Alliance archives. They were here for the first 15 years and I assume they are still here, but I'm not sure about that. It was fun, I loved it.

Through Ohio Theatre Alliance, we got associated also with the American College Theatre Festival. I think I mentioned that earlier. We hosted this two years in the early 70's after the Creative Arts Center was open. That was initially in three states, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio. So, not only through the Ohio Theatre Alliance, but through ACTF, we got to have contacts with people in the whole region. Very beneficial to us in terms of getting to know the programs, and it was a lot of fun. I recommend you join the Ohio Theatre Alliance.

**Now, you mention the newsletter, the very first newsletter. Was that an Alliance newsletter or department newsletter?**

No, that was an Alliance newsletter, something we worked very hard on. We also put out a directory of what each college and university was doing, what plays they were doing, a description of their program. That was circulated statewide to high school teachers. We put out a directory of the Ohio Alliance, because we had great liaison with the high schools. One of the things we did in the department was that I established- and I have to say I because really the fact that I had to drag the faculty screaming into it- a high school workshop, an annual workshop. You know, once they did it, they did it willingly and they did it well. We would bring in up to 200 high school kids and their teachers each year for a workshop. This was, yes, it was recruiting, but it was also continuing education for the teachers. We never did any pressure on the recruiting whatsoever. Of course, it helped us be established in the eyes of the high school teachers as a viable theatre department and, eventually, they sent us their students. One of the things we would do, we had so much demand that we said, okay, each high school is limited to five students per each teacher that comes, and the teacher must participate, so they would participate in the workshops right along with the students. They loved it because it was a learning experience.

One of the things we were involved in the Ohio Theatre Alliance was secondary education. We spent a lot of time on the question of secondary education. We wanted to get a certificate in theatre. We worked on that year after year after year and developed materials, and we lobbied the State Department of Education, but it was our feeling that theatre should be stronger in the high schools. I think we were fairly successful in making changes in the State Department of Education.

**During this time, did you get much or good support from the Administration here at Wright State?**

For our work with the Ohio Theatre Alliance?

**Extending out into the Alliance and into the community?**

Lew, I don't think they had any idea that we were doing anything at all. I would tell Gene Cantelupe, but the university never cared at all about our relationship with high schools.

**Who was President at that time?**

It was mostly Kegerreis, mostly Kegerreis. Yeah.

**I wonder if this was the beginning of the Muse Machine?**

The Muse Machine? That was Susie Bassani.

**I know. It sounds almost like that was the introduction to how the Muse Machine came about.**

One of the things the Muse Machine was doing...remember, we talked about it early on here and just really considered it. This was in the early 70's, when we hardly even had facilities. Why don't we start doing some high school workshop productions in the summertime. You know, bring kids together from throughout the area and produce a show. It was just the logistics of it that were so difficult because we were so understaffed and we had so much other work to do, that we never quite came to do that. Of course, that's the kernel of the Muse Machine; it was a great idea. They did really well.

**Well, now once this was successful, these workshops, did the administration pick up on it?**

No. Never. Not one ounce.

**That's too bad.**

Yes, it is.

[Short break in recording]

We were talking about outreach, Lew, and one important outreach program that we had in the department was children's theatre. This was something we started in 1971 in our first year, to have a children's theatre program. We would present that on Saturday mornings a couple of times. It was great experience for the students and we brought kids, little ones, into the theatre. Because there is a real need for children's theatre. There was nothing that was much going on in the Dayton area. Then we got the idea of touring this production because if we did it down in our little Celebration Theatre, why couldn't we just pick it up and take it out to schools. We started doing that and did that on a regular basis. I remember Anna, Ohio and Bradford, Ohio. They would always return the forms, like in return mail. We always knew we were going to Anna and Bradford, they were far north, you know, it was out there. But I thought that was terrific. The people would come back and say, 'Boy, when you went into Anna, it was almost like they met you at

the city limits, with welcoming, with donuts and coffee. They were so happy to see the kids come in because they didn't get a chance to see live theatre.

I always wanted a full-time children's theatre person on my staff, but we were always understaffed and the faculty, they weren't hostile but they certainly had no enthusiasm for giving up a slot they thought they absolutely needed for children's theatre. Only one year, I think in our first year, we had a young winsome, charming lady by the name of Ellen Timothy, who we hired as half-time theatre costumer and half-time children's theatre person. It was her responsibility to do the plays. Eventually, though, I think the children's theatre program died, probably when I left. I think we kept it going all the way up, I forget exactly, I'll have to do some research on that and find out but we kept it going for a good ten years and I thought that was a very beneficial thing. It gave good experience to some of the younger students who hadn't yet made it into a major production, so it was good.

**You have already talked about the Motion Picture Department. Tell me about dance.**

Dance came to the Theatre Arts Department after the Creative Arts Center was built, probably in the mid-70's, from the Department of Music. Bill Fenton, who had connections with CCM in Cincinnati, where they had a dance program, wanted to establish it here. He established the dance program, I think, in the 60's, right on early when the university was founded, but never had the facilities or the staff to do anything with it. So, he said, "Well, you take it", and Cantelupe said, "You want it?", and I said, "Yes, we sure do want it", because I saw dance as an integral part of theatre training. Besides the fact that dance is such a wonderful, wonderful art. Well, we struggled, struggled, struggled getting a faculty mix. I had people who- I hired a young man, Eric Nielson [ph], 6ft. 4 in., a real dancer, and he did well. He was a good teacher and the kids loved him, and we filled up his class. That's where the theatre could help because we said to the acting students, you have to take dance. So they had the beginning curriculum to go.

**Now, Eric came out of the University of Utah program, the dance program.**

Yeah, I think he did. Eric quit on me on September 1. He came in on September 1, got his last check and left. I never did understand. I later ran into him at a conference and he walked away from me, but he never explained that and I don't know what ever was the matter with Eric. That caused us to go through a cycle where we picked up temporary people for one or two or three years, and the program was going nowhere and nothing was happening. And then- I consider this one of the best things I ever did at Wright State- we had people on temporary one-year appointments and I said, we are not renewing, and I could do that. I don't know if I could do it today but I could do it back then. I went out and searched national for three new people to come in. At that time, I was on the board of the Dayton Ballet. I had gone on with Sebastian. He gave me the lead for one dancer who he had hired, who was a great choreographer, Mary Jenone [ph], 5 ft. tall and a bundle of fire and just as much fun, and a great choreographer and a good teacher, but

fiery as the devil, and then I hired a young lady in the more traditional way of asking for resumes, Sandy Tanner- I forget where she came from but she was a great teacher- and then the capstone is I hired Suzanne Walker. I had Suzanne teach for me one summer and I called her back, cajoled her back, and she was at the time in her life where she was ready to come back and work. I brought the three ladies to my house the week before school started. They had all moved in to town.

**When was this?**

This was in late '77. They got to my house and we started talking about a curriculum. We were going to redo the curriculum in toto, and we sat there for three days, working out the curriculum. I was the moderator because they were dancers. I remember Suzanne always said, "Oh, we were so hungry and we wanted to go and you wouldn't feed us." Of course, if you know dancers, they are always hungry and always starving to death. That program, the excellence of that program, and it really has developed into an excellent program, started with those three ladies. Mary was only with us for a year and we had to replace her, and Sandy left after three years, but Suzanne was there and she was a phenomenal, incredible teacher, incredible choreographer, a Type A personality, who did her job 80 hours a week.

**Let me ask you a question about hiring procedure. You mentioned that you had established that you could have your faculty for one year on a temporary basis. Did you have to bring these people in through an extensive search process or could you just hire them at that time.**

I think that things were loose.

**That's what I think is important to mention.**

Things were loose, and there was just more latitude. We probably couldn't get away with it now and that would be to the detriment of the department.

**So, that's, I think, an important issue to bring up on the historical perspective.**

Well, the whole university that first 10 years- I mentioned this earlier and it bears repeating again- Bob Kegerreis was a laissez-faire president. He did not really concern himself with the day-to-day operation of the university, and it left latitude. I don't know who else benefited from it but I think our department, under Paige Mulhollan or subsequent, it would have never happened.

In fact, Lew, let me go on to another point. In 1982- I'm guessing- you remember every department in the university had to do the strategic plan; this assessment, this horrible, horrendous thing. Our turn came and we dreaded it and dreaded it and dreaded it but, you know, we worked at it and we worked at it very hard. Don Thomas, graduate school dean, was in charge of this and they had to furnish us with all the statistics they had. Well, that was a bonanza for us and it got us a lot of positive things. I involved the whole

faculty in this and we did a thorough job of that report. It was longer than they expected, and it was a blockbuster in terms of the information that it had. For example- I just made a note about this- we had achieved, in 1983, academic excellence for our program in theatre arts, with nine point faculty understaffed, according to the state statistics; 9 ½ faculty understaffed. Incredible, that's absolutely incredible. We had, in the university, average salaries were the second lowest of any department in the university. So, not only did we have far fewer faculty but we were being paid next to nothing. All of our play production expenses were earned. There was no direct subsidy from the university. So, you know, and then we had space all over campus. One thing that we did with that assessment that we did is that we used it to really start banging on the university for a Creative Arts Center II. I told you earlier that I never had a chance to be around the trustees. We did that a couple times, three times per year, because we were always being shown off. We talked to them about Creative Arts Center II, and a couple times I made direct pitches to the trustees about the fact that we were 15 years overdue on adding to this building. I kept mentioning about these things.

Anyway, I remember one of our faculty members... the final decision came out, there was a faculty space allocation committee. Joe Schmidt, Physics, was on it. One of our faculty members, Joe Tilford [ph], who was our scene designer, was on that committee, and represented the department. Joe can really be nasty at times, and he went in there with those statistics and started yelling at people, practically, I mean waving papers at them and talking about how help was...he was just really a good person to do this, and crying about it. He came out of that with a recommendation from the committee that Creative Arts Center II go forward, and that was accepted. So that horrible, horrendous assessment, which was I think 86 single page, single spaced, 86 pages long, really had a payoff for us, and it was fun.

**Anything else you want to say about the dance program, because I want to take you to the tech program.**

Yes. Dance started getting quality kids. We started recruiting. By the way, our recruiting, at one point we had students from 17 different states. We got mostly east of the Mississippi, but we were getting kids sometimes out of Utah, New Mexico, and Dance started doing the same thing. I was going to Georgia to recruit, to Atlanta, to performing arts high schools, and suddenly some of these young ladies who looked like dancers were coming in to work with us. And we had a great cadre of young men who wanted to be dancers as well. So that was the quality of the program; it was so good and the teaching was so good, and finally, in Creative Arts Center II, we got those wonderful dance studios.

**When did John Rodriquez join the faculty?**

John joined, I'm guessing, about 1980, maybe when Sandy Tanner left. We considered that a coup. Suzanne knew John and worked with John. John was a good teacher, and we got him to come in, and by the way, I don't even think he has a bachelor's degree; I don't think he has an undergraduate degree. That's something else that we pioneered at the

university. Because Suzanne did not have a bachelor's degree, John did not have a bachelor's degree, Bruce Cromer [ph] only has a bachelor's degree. So, we were among the first to do that. I told you earlier about the split between Julia Reichert and Jim Klein. And I want to say this about students from out of state. Early on, we put pressure on the university, again by just mentioning and mentioning it, you've got to give us some space. Because I can't have 17-year-old kids from out of state come here and live in Fairborn or live in East Dayton. Hardly any parent was going to allow that. At one point, we had so many students in the one dormitory that we had, that it was almost laughable. Maybe a third of the students there were our students, at least for one year until they got to know people and could find off campus living. So, you know, we just kept banging away until finally, Bob Francis I think might have been involved in getting the first off campus housing, when he was still here. We had lots of kids over there. I would imagine there are a lot of kids over there now from theatre arts.

People thought... when I came here, Lew- you know this is true- people considered this to be a commuter school. I never considered this to be a community school. It was not a community school. We were going to get kids and we were going to compete, and we did. We had that effect on the university.

### **Now take me to the Technical Department.**

The Technical Department was a problem and it probably still is a problem. It is a bottomless pit. There is never enough resources, never enough people to do the things that they want to do, and the things they are probably capable of doing. Let me tell you an anecdote that Chuck Dotwell at Otterbein told me, but it illustrates what I just said. When he started his program at Otterbein he and Fred Thayer, Fred was a design person and the tech director and costuming, they did six shows a year plus summer theatre. They were young, vibrant, and excited and interested. Then, Chuck, in order to keep up with me, I think, kept getting more resources and then suddenly they had a technical director, a scene designer, a lighting designer. They had a tech staff of about four or five people. Then one day the five people came to Chuck and they said, "You know, we are doing six shows a year, we're working too hard. We have to cut back or you have to get us more help." That's the bottomless pit. We just always spent so much money. I always felt, in our production program, that we had created a monster, that the tech aspects of our productions were sometimes better than our acting and directing, and yet people would walk out and say, "Boy, that was a great technical production, I loved the scenery." Well, that's not a wonderful thing to say! [Laughs] You know, it was hard to cut back on that; to come back to that reader's theatre type theatre, just storytelling theatre.

### **The reason I asked about tech is that it has been such and impressive aspect of your program. You mentioned Joe Tilford, who was in tech.**

Yes, we have had some good people and there are still some good people. They are good people. But one of the problems with tech is that they go through students very fast; they exploit students, they wear them out, students quit. I had one faculty member, the man

died within a year or two years after he left here, a young man. He was from Carnegie-Mellon, you know, which has a great reputation as a theatre program, and he said, "Your students are trash." He said that at the end of the year as he was leaving. He said, "They're trash." You know, I was just so stunned by that. Our students are our students. They are kids you work with; they're the kids you make better by your going out to find a better quality student. But they're not trash, and if you let them work and allow them to work and don't beat them to death, they're fine. They're just absolutely fine. But I thought that was a terrible attitude. I understand, even today, that for all of the students who come in design tech, only a few graduate each year. But those that graduate are well-trained and they go on and they get jobs. There are a lot of jobs out there for good well-trained technical students and design students, costume, scenery and lighting. Those lead to good work, good pay.

**Tell me about *Equus*.**

With George Grizzard, I directed Peter Shaffer's play. I was very nervous about selecting the play because, one, I had never dealt with an equity actor of George Grizzard's stature and, two, about the nudity in the play because I had never directed a play with nudity.

**What was the year?**

'82. I will double-check all these dates. George came and we got him set up in an apartment. He was very gracious, and we went to work and he was a consummate professional. He worked very hard and he did that through the entire rehearsal period. I remember one rehearsal once, the father, the student was playing the father and was sort of sliding through, and George stopped and he looked him right in the eye, and he says, "That's boring". That's exactly what needed to be said. That was boring. His mind wasn't in it and he wasn't paying attention to it. But George really inspired those students and the production was a beautiful production. It was a production in which all of my students were just deeply committed to their characters and were believable as their characters. Now, the young boy and the girl, Marilyn and Ken, were as good as you are going to find. They were really good. Probably the students who had to play the parents, it was more of a strain for them, but they were also good and also believable. And George was great. I asked George one time, "George, can we sit down and talk about acting." He said, "Oh no, I know nothing about acting theory, I'm not going to talk about acting." But I observed him and I learned a lot just watching him, and it influenced what I thought about acting and acting training, having watched him work.

**The reason I asked about *Equus*, is because at that time this was a big step for the university.**

You mean about nudity?

**The concept.**



It wasn't our first nudity. Our first nudity was *The Prime of Miss Jean Brody*.

**But it got the most publicity.**

Yes, six weeks after Grizzard went home, there was a letter that appeared in the Dayton Daily News by Colonel Retired U. S. Marine Corps Wade Jackson, and he said that he demanded the firing of Dr. Abe Bassett for permitting teenage nudity on the stage. Of course, Ken and Marilyn were not teenagers, they were 21, so they were okay about that. This is where I discovered the existence of the conservative right wing network. Within six weeks, the university was receiving letters from Kansas, from Mississippi, Arkansas, New York, all around the country, all around Ohio, saying what an immoral place Wright State was, no right did they have to put nude students and display them before the public [Laughs]. I wrote an article on this. I interviewed "Mick" [Michael] Ferrari, who was provost at the time, and I interviewed Bob Kegerreis. I always said that we struck a blow for academic freedom, because when Kegerreis defended me, and I think he had no choice but to defend the theatre department and Dr. Abe Bassett, the letter writers started saying, "We want Dr. Kegerreis and Dr. Bassett fired." Of course, it went up to Colter, [ph] who was the head of the board of higher education, and he defended the university's actions. Finally, letters were going to Celeste, who was governor at the time, saying you've got to fire Colter and Kegerreis and Bassett. By the time it got up to Colter they had forgotten about me. Everybody said, no, this was produced at other universities, it was certainly within the realm of what universities do, we have nude students in art classes and we have nude students in medical classes, so this is not something that we should not be doing.

**Was George Grizzard the first professional actor used in the production?**

He was not. We had a program where we brought in equity actors to act and teach on a quarter-by-quarter basis. That slot, you can't find really good actors who are really good teachers. Of course, we did pay people to come in and act for smaller bits. But the George Grizzard thing was so successful that had I stayed at the university what I wanted to do would be to move in the direction of doing more of that, finding good actors to come in and work with students, because they elevate the production in terms of their work ethic. The difference, I said, between a professional actor and a student actor, or an amateur actor, is a professional comes to work the first day scared to death and the amateur actor is scared to death the day before you open. They come in early and they work hard, and they are all business.

**Did you institute the adjudication process using professional actors, or was that beyond your time? For students' admission to the program.**

No. We hired professional actors but we hired agents. We got people from Hollywood who were casting directors, New York casting directors, various people to come in and give feedback, and feedback as one of five or six people giving feedback. It was sort of a prestige thing more than anything else. That's when we finally moved towards auditioning for the BFA program and then for the other programs.

**Did you get any static about that, when you did auditioning, to just have students enter into a program?**

No, no we did not, not from the university. Some of the faculty may have had questions about it and I had perhaps some questions because, at the point that you start to audition you may reduce your number of students, but I also knew, and this turned out to be true, that when people find out it's harder to get in, more people want to get in, so it really benefited us.

[Break in recording]

**[Summer theatre]**

We started the Wright State University Summer Theatre, I believe in 1973 or '74. Virtually the first year that the Creative Arts Center Festival Playhouse was open for operation. The first year, we made a case to the university- John Murray, I believe was the Provost or Associate Provost that we worked through- that we would charge our students tuition and the money that the university would earn would account for the subsidy. So we started the summer theatre on a shoe budget, really on a shoe budget. In retrospect, that was the wrong thing and the wrong way to go, because it said to the university that we could do plays cheaply. Well, anyway, nonetheless, we started and we hired mostly our own students. The next summer, our own students again, the students from the outside, until finally, maybe in year three or year four, we said, we've got to get off of this model because we are not paying ourselves anything; minimal wages for being involved. We're working hard, when we really were working hard, and we don't have enough production money. I think in maybe about the third year is the time I guess it was Spiegel who said, "Okay, you can have the box office."

Well, the summer theatre got better and better, and we spent a lot of time at it. It was really sort of depressing in a lot of respects because I remember in May when we were gearing up for the summer theatre and worrying about going out for auditions and finding people to be in the summer theatre program, I would look out the window at 2 o'clock in the afternoon and the art faculty and the music faculty were going home; I knew that we would be in the theatre for another six hours or seven hours. You know, that was an accumulative thing. We had a lot of trouble selling the program. It seemed like every year the thing we had to cut back on was advertising money. That was the thing that was expendable and that should not have been the thing that was expendable, especially once that we got our box office money, because you have to spend money to make money. You have to do merchandising. Well, we tried all kinds of merchandising ways and we were just not getting the audience that we thought we deserved. We had some great productions. At the same time, Kenley Players was going downtown and that was the big thing to do in the summertime. B.W. was the writer for the Journal Herald and it was all we could do to get him out and maybe mention us, so we were getting no press coverage, we didn't have advertising money, and our audiences were not terrific.

One year, we started off with *The Mouse Trap* and the place filled up, and we thought, great, we're finally on our way, but that was an Agatha Christie crowd and they disappeared on week two, three, four and five. Finally, after six years, I said to Gene Cantelupe, I said, "Gene, we're coming to the end of our rope." Beginning in the 7<sup>th</sup> season I said, "Gene, this is probably going to be our last year because we are not getting funded from the university in a way that is adequate, and we're killing ourselves. My faculty is exhausted and they need the time off." So we made another pitch for support from Kegerreis, and none was forthcoming. So I said, "Well, Gene, I'm going to close." He says, "Well, I'll send a note saying that the summer theatre will be closed." He did and we didn't hear anything.

In about six weeks, Keg called us into the office and says, "Why is the summer theatre closing?" It seems that his friends downtown had said, "Bob, how come you're closing the summer theatre?" So enough people had come out regularly and said, hey, that's a pretty good product you have out there. But at the point, it was too late. He didn't say, "Well, I can meet your needs." He might have said, "Well, how much do you need?" But, you know, that was the end of that, so that was the end of the summer theatre. It was good for us. We needed the rest and relaxation.

**Can you describe in one word what it was like at Wright State when you first came here?**

Exciting.

**Okay, what about now?**

Fossilized.

**Take that further.**

John Gardner started Common Cause, and said this organization should go out of existence in 25 years. Why, somebody said? Because organizations get stiff and rigid, and they need fresh starts. In a university, all contracts should cease at year 25 and start fresh in year one.

**That's interesting. Are there any questions that I haven't asked you that you would like to speak to?**

Well, I remember driving up Grange Hall from my house to come to work in the summer time and spring time, and feeling so good and so excited about going to work. Later, when I heard my colleagues in speech communications talk about self-actualization, I thought that's what that means, that's what this is. I just really felt good; it was fun to come to work. It was just a nice, nice atmosphere. We had good students, good colleagues, we were off in a corner of the university so we didn't get caught up in the petty politics. What more could a person ask? Well, we could have had more support and we could have been better appreciated. We were always appreciated but they never

colored it green; it took a long time to color it green. But Keg was always dragging us off here and mentioning the theatre arts program, along with the art therapy program, as a model of excellence in the university. We got a lot of accolades there. I wanted to stand up every time and say, "Hey, color it green!"

**What would you describe as probably your finest moment in your theatre career here? Your finest moment.**

I think, the first Academic Excellence Award, which came to the department, to the faculty and to our students. That was quite an accomplishment for a new university, for a young department, one that was 9 ½ faculty understaffed, to accomplish that. So I am very proud of that. There were a lot of wonderful moments, a lot of wonderful plays and a lot of wonderful students.

Do we have time for me to mention two other plays?

**That's what I would like to hear.**

*Taming of the Shrew*, on the quad in the summer of 1971 while the Creative Arts Center was under production. I had the most phenomenal group of young actors. Nancy McDonald was a freshman, 18 years old, and she was my Katherine, and Bob Bailey, who was a freshman or a sophomore, was my Petruchio. I had so many people in there. They were so wonderful and we did that on the quad, we were going to do it for two weekends for six performances, and it went really well. Ellen Timothy was there, Jim Boles, Wendell Myer, Joe Herzog. I can remember so many of the kids' names that were in that production. It was very good and we had a nice turnout. On Saturday night, when we closed the first weekend, a great wind came and blew down the set. It was devastating. There was nothing left but this rake stake sitting up on the quad. Wendell, who was our assistant technical director, Fred Myers, was our technical director, he said, "Oh, I'll put it back together." I said, "No, don't worry, Wendell, we'll play this on a bare stage." You know, when I came out a couple of days later, he had put the set back up again so we had the set for the second weekend. That was just a wonderful, wonderful highlight.

Another play that I dearly loved was Hugh Leonard's, *A Life*. For that production we went to New York and we hired four equity actors to play with four of our students. It was two couples, both as mature couples and as young people, and it was a contrast. It was an Irish play and it came off just beautifully. I remember being in the audience the first night and I was shaking. I didn't direct the show, I only produced the show, but I was shaking. I was so nervous and so happy because I knew this would be a great show, and it was a great show.

**Any other plays that stand out in your memory?**

*Jesus Christ Superstar, Sweeney Todd....*

**Which was the most difficult show to produce, or to get onstage?**

*Sweeney Todd* was a huge production and cost a lot of money.

**Did you direct that?**

No, I produced that. That might have cost us \$50,000 to put on and that was in the early 80's. That was a lot of money to spend. It would be like \$100,000 today, or more. Technically, that was very difficult. But our tech crews and staff worked pretty well, and were pretty efficient. They amazed me in their capabilities. They were good. We had some good, good people. They complained a lot but they did the job well.

**Well, you have established a marvelous program and I think today's program should be attributed directly to you. Once we finish this tape, you will have chance to audit this and to make additions, and to also add anything that we may not have talked about. Thank you for doing this interview.**

Lew, thank you.